

By Bill Lambrecht, St. Louis Post-Dispatch
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WASHINGTON - The White House today will announce the awarding of \$1.1 billion in stimulus money for a high-speed rail corridor providing three round trips daily between St. Louis and Chicago at 110 miles per hour along most of the route.

In addition, Missouri will receive \$31 million for eight projects intended to upgrade passenger rail service between St. Louis and Kansas City.

The announcement will be made in St. Louis this afternoon by Ed Montgomery, White House executive director for auto communities and workers. He is to be accompanied by Gov. Jay Nixon, Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, and other political and transportation leaders.

The outlay is part of White House plans to award \$8 billion for high-speed rail and related improvements across the country. President Barack Obama was to travel to Tampa, Fla., today to announce the grants, one of his administration's key initiatives.

The White House said in a statement Wednesday night that the government planned to fund 13 new large-scale, high-speed rail corridors across the country, likening the spending to President Dwight Eisenhower's commitment to interstate highways.

The \$1.1 billion award for the St. Louis-to-Chicago line was a significant victory for the Midwest, achieved after months of fierce competition. The award covers the first phase of the project; the entire cost is estimated at about \$4 billion. In addition, Illinois was scheduled to receive \$134 million for smaller passenger rail improvements.

"This is a huge deal," Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said in an interview. "It will be a real boost for economic development along the St. Louis-to-Chicago corridor, and we need it. Downstate Illinois has been struggling with 11 percent unemployment, and this comes at a great time."

Carnahan called the awards "big news" for St. Louis.

"Soon, area workers will be put to work building high-speed infrastructure connecting the two great cities of St. Louis and Chicago and dramatically improving the rail system between St. Louis and Kansas City," Carnahan said.

"By connecting Missouri's two largest economic engines to the rest of the Midwest with faster, more-efficient rail travel, we are making a down payment on the economic future of our region."

The outlay, however, may provide Republican critics more opportunities to complain about the administration's spending decisions.

Illinois officials did not have an immediate estimate on construction time for the entire project. Some segments will be completed first, meaning that trains will be able to achieve the maximum speeds only on portions of the St. Louis-to-Chicago route. A White House release said that the

110-mile-per-hour route ultimately would extend from Alton to Dwight, Ill., 75 miles southwest of Chicago.

The \$31 million Missouri award is designed to prevent delays that are interrupting service in the St. Louis-to-Kansas City corridor. As it stands, passenger trains often must give way to freight trains along the route, leading to uncertainties in rail travel between Missouri's major cities.

"What this will do is create an integrated rapid-transit commuter service between Kansas City, St. Louis and Chicago that can yield economic development and jobs both short-term and long-term," said a congressional aide who requested anonymity because the award had not been officially announced Wednesday.

The awards mark a lobbying success for elected officials in Illinois and Missouri. Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn and Nixon worked in tandem to persuade the White House, saying that high-speed rail and other improvements would bolster the economies of the two states.

Late last year, Quinn pressed the case in meetings with Obama and top White House aides. And Carnahan, a member of the House Transportation Committee, lobbied Vice President Joe Biden and made personal appeals to Federal Railroad Administrator Joseph Szabo and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

By November, the federal government had received nearly 50 applications from 24 states requesting more than \$50 billion for high-speed rail awards in addition to more than 200 requests for billions in smaller projects.

White House officials said that in its first 40 years of construction, the interstate system increased the nation's productivity by one-fourth and accounted for more than 7 million jobs.

"This is a long-term venture in which states will need to plan projects, purchase and lay track, build and assemble equipment and construct or upgrade train stations, tunnels and bridges," the White House said in a release, noting that Spain spent two decades and \$35 billion to build its high-speed rail system.

After learning of Illinois' award, Durbin was asked if having an Illinoisan in the White House was helpful. "Doesn't hurt," he said.

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